Name: _____ Class: _____

Ruthless

By William DeMille
1945

William DeMille (1878-1955) was an American writer, most well-known for screenwriting and film directing. In this short story, a man sets a trap for a suspected thief at his summer vacation home. ***Purpose for Reading:*** *To understand how different points of view between characters create tension. To learn about how authors use situational irony to affect readers. In this lesson, you'll practice analyzing how a character's choices and actions affect plot development. This means paying attention to how characters react to specific dialogue or events and how those reactions move the story forward. As you read, take notes on Judson's dialogue and actions and how these lead to the story's conclusion.*

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[1] Outside, the woods lay basking in clear October sunlight; trees a riot of color, air full of Autumn's tang[1] and the sharp, exciting smell of moist, leaf-covered earth.

Inside, a man smiled grimly as he turned from the bathroom cabinet, entered the expensively primitive living room of his mountain camp, and crossed to a closet set in the pine wall. It was his special closet, with a spring lock and in it he kept guns, ammunition, fishing-rods, tackle[2] and liquor. Not even his wife was allowed to have a key, for Judson Webb loved his personal possessions and felt a sense of deep outrage if they were touched by any hand but his own. The closet door stood open; he had been packing his things away for the Winter, and in a few minutes would be driving back to civilization.

As he looked at the shelf on which the liquor stood his smile was not attractive. All the bottles were unopened except one quart of Bourbon which was placed invitingly in front, a whiskey glass by its side. This bottle was less than half full. As he took it from the shelf his wife spoke from the adjoining bedroom:

"I'm all packed, Judson," she said. "Hasn't Alec come to turn the water off and get the keys?"

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1. **Tang** ***(noun)*** a strong taste, flavor, or smell
2. the equipment required for a task or sport; in this case, for fishing

Alec lived about a mile down the road and acted as a caretaker for the city folks when they were away.

"He's down at the lake taking the boats out of water. Said he'd be back in half an hour."

Marcia came into the room carrying her suitcase. But she paused in surprise as she saw the bottle in her husband's hand.

"Judson!" she exclaimed, "you're not taking a drink at ten o'clock in the morning?"

"You wrong me, my dear," he chuckled, "I'm not taking anything out of this bottle: I am merely putting a little kick into it."

His closed hand opened and he put upon the table two tiny white pellets[3] as he started to uncork the whiskey. Her eyes narrowed as she watched him. She had learned to dread that tone of his voice; it was the tone he used when he was planning to "put something over"[4] in a business deal.

"Whoever broke into my closet last Winter and stole my liquor will probably try it again once we are out of here," he went on, "only this time he'll wish he hadn't."

She caught her breath at the cruel vindictiveness of his manner as one by one he dropped the tablets into the bottle and held it up to watch them dissolve.

"What are they?" she asked, "something to make him sick?"

"And how!" He seemed fascinated as he saw the genial Bourbon change into a lethal dose: "At least no one has found an antidote:[5] once it's down it's curtains."[6] He corked his bottled vengeance and set it back on the shelf alongside the little whiskey glass.

"Everything nice and handy," he remarked approvingly. "Now, Mr. Thief, when you break in, drink hearty; I won't begrudge[7] you this one."

The woman's face was pale. "Don't do it, Judson," she gasped. "It's horrible — it's murder."

"The law doesn't call it murder if I shoot a thief who is entering my house by force," he said harshly. "Also, the use of rat poison is quite legal. The only way any rat can get into this closet is

3. a small hard ball or tube-shaped piece of any substance
4. to trick or deceive someone
5. a medicine taken to stop the effects of a certain poison
6. the end, as in when the curtains close over a stage at the end of a play
7. **Begrudge** ***(verb)*** to give reluctantly or with displeasure

to break in. What happens then is his affair, not mine."

"Don't do it, Judson," she begged. "The law doesn't punish burglary by death; so what right have you — "

"When it comes to protecting my property I make my own laws." His deep voice suggested a big dog growling at threatened loss of a bone.

[20] "But all they did was to steal a little liquor," she pleaded. "Probably some boys off on a lark.[8] They didn't do any real damage."

"That's not the point," he said. "If a man holds me up and robs me of five dollars it makes me just as sore as if he took a hundred. A thief's a thief."

She made one last effort. "We won't be here till next spring. I can't bear to think of that deathtrap waiting there all the time. Suppose something happens to us — and no one knows — "

He chuckled once more at her words. "We'll take a chance on that," he said. "I've made my pile[9] by taking chances. If I should die, you can do as you please. The stuff will be yours."

It was useless to argue, she knew. He had always been ruthless in business and whenever anything crossed him. Things had to be done his way. She turned toward the outer door with a sigh of defeat. "I'll walk down the road and say goodbye at the farmhouse," she said quietly. "You can pick me up there." She had made up her mind to tell Alec's wife. Someone had to know.

[25] "Okay, my dear," he smiled genially, "and don't worry about your poor, abused little burglar. No one is going to get hurt who hasn't got it coming to him."

As she went down the path he started to close the closet door; then paused as he remembered his hunting boots drying outside on the porch. They belonged in the closet, so leaving the door open he went to fetch them from the heavy, rustic table on which they stood, along with his bag and top coat.

Alec was coming up from the lake and waved to him from a distance. A chipmunk, hearing Judson's heavy tread, abandoned the acorn he was about to add to his store within the cabin wall and disappeared, like an electric bulb burning out. Judson, reaching for his boots, stepped fairly upon the acorn, his foot slid from under him and his head struck the massive table as he fell.

8. just having fun
9. got rich

Several minutes later he began to regain his senses. Alec's strong arm was supporting his head as he lay on the porch and a kindly voice was saying: "'Twarn't[10] much of a fall, Mr. Webb. You aren't cut none; jest knocked out for a minute. Here, take this; it'll pull you together."

A small whiskey glass was pressed to his lips. Dazed and half-conscious, he drank.

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10. it wasn't

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which event sets the story into motion?
    A. the theft of Judson's liquor
    B. Judson's decision to have a drink
    C. Judson's reluctance to return to the city
    D. an argument between Judson and Marcia

2. How does Alec's arrival at the cabin affect the events of the story?
    A. It leads to Marcia leaving her husband.
    B. It leads to Judson drinking poisoned whiskey.
    C. It leads to the theft of some of Judson's liquor.
    D. It leads to an argument between Judson and Marcia.

3. Which of the following actions causes Marcia's fear?
    A. "he turned from the bathroom cabinet, entered the expensively primitive living room of his mountain camp, and crossed to a closet set in the pine wall" (Paragraph 2)
    B. "he had been packing his things away for the Winter, and in a few minutes would be driving back to civilization" (Paragraph 2)
    C. "she saw the bottle in her husband's hand" (Paragraph 7)
    D. "one by one he dropped the tablets into the bottle and held it up to watch them dissolve" (Paragraph 12)

4. How does the conversation between Judson and his wife develop the plot of the passage?
    A. It causes Alec to retaliate against Judson.
    B. It prompts Marcia to go to warn Alec's wife about the poison.
    C. It causes Judson to be distracted by Marcia's obvious distress.
    D. It prompts Judson to consider throwing out the poisoned whiskey.

5. Which statement expresses the main theme of the story?
    A. No crime is bad enough to warrant another person's death.
    B. It's important to take the opinions of loved ones into consideration.
    C. There will be consequences if people take justice into their own hands.
    D. It is fair to make sure a person's punishment fits the crime they committed.

6. Which detail from the text best reveals Judson's belief about crime and punishment?

   A. "He corked his bottled vengeance and set it back on the shelf alongside the little whiskey glass." (Paragraph 14)
   B. "Also, the use of rat poison is quite legal. The only way any rat can get into this closet is to break in." (Paragraph 17)
   C. "We won't be here till next spring. I can't bear to think of that deathtrap waiting there all the time." (Paragraph 22)
   D. "'and don't worry about your poor, abused little burglar. No one is going to get hurt who hasn't got it coming to him.'" (Paragraph 25)

7. How does Judson Webb cause his own death in "Ruthless"? Be sure to identify the most important lines of dialogue or events in the story and explain how they cause an important decision or action to take place.

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In the context of the text, do you think Judson was right to take justice into his own hands? Why or why not? Are there other ways that Judson could've possibly held the thief accountable without harming anyone?

2. Describe a time when you wanted to take justice into your own hands. What lessons did you learn from this experience?

3. In the story, Judson would have lived if he hadn't attempted to punish the thief. How fair is it that Judson died even though he didn't technically commit a crime, while whoever stole his whiskey gets to live with the crime?

4. How is Judson's preoccupation with what he believes is "fair" his downfall? Describe a time when something unfair happened to you and you had to let it go. How did you learn from the experience?

5. In the story, Judson believes that death is an appropriate punishment for the thief because every crime is equal in his eyes. Do you think that the punishment should fit the crime? Why or why not? How do you think Judson should have punished the thief?